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1918

BETWEEN TWO WARS
1861-1918



ANNIVERSARY POEM
By a Member of the Class of 1865
for their Reunion

YALE UNIVERSITY
June 18, 1918

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George Sherwood Tuckerman

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I

We came to old Alumni Hall
In June of eighteen sixty-one.
That day we vividly recall,
The tests we tried, the entrance won.

Our youth was hasting to its flower,
Pulsing with life in fuller flow
And giddy with the thrills of power
Whose later strivings none might know.

The land we loved had known no war,
The arts of peace had held all eyes,
Above us shone a tranquil star
And conscience dozed in compromise.

But when our names were entered here
The crisis of an age had come.
A challenge rang—a fierce, wild jeer—
To fight or mark the nation's doom.

We saw it all—and then a pause
To watch the march of vast events,
To see the wreck of outraged laws
And know sly treason's dark intents.

II

We learned the greatness then of right
In what it cost to make right stand.
We learned the deviltry of might
That clutched and hurled a demon's brand.

Some learned so well they left our side
And with the army took the field.
How in our hearts their names abide
Written in light on memory's shield!

Those college years, the four we knew,
How big the things that filled them all!
How tense the thought, how large the view,
How stirring was their moral call!

How much we learned from that one life
Whose massive strength we saw unfold,
Serene in storm and bitter strife
With hand on helm right on to hold.

The great inaugurals we read,
The speech at Gettysburg we heard—
Too blindly weighed what there was said,
Nor sensed the reach of that far word.

But in us deep the stamp was set
Of Lincoln's person sweet and strong
In lines one never could forget,
His love of men, his scorn of wrong.

III

And then the June of sixty-five
Came round and lightly dropped the bar.
Like bees we darted from the hive
And to the four winds flew afar

To find a world in fragrant bloom,
Mild airs instead of shivering blast,
Fair skies for lowering clouds of gloom—
The cannon still, the carnage past.

That scheme to raise a proud, new state
On black slaves' toil and poor whites' woe,
With lordly masters to dictate
How men should think and plant and hoe,

Had failed. The Union lived as one
And one as never known till then,
With freedom for its corner stone,
With rights as law for men as men.

The tranquil star above us shone
And we were in a fresh, new dawn
Whose glow along the road was thrown
On which we strode as men new born.

People awake and all alive
Were hard at work throughout the land,
We started in to join the drive
And sought how best to lend a hand.

IV

We conned our books again and saw
More in them than we once had thought,
We read theology or law,
We studied medicine or taught.

We took the pen and tried to write,
Prepared a brief and tried to speak—
The kind of study was not quite
Like Latin, Calculus or Greek,

But those had given us a drill
That proved of use in heavier tasks,
A certain aptitude and will
To get at things behind all masks.

From ordered work we roved abroad
For sport, or now and then for health,
And many saw upon the road
Who said that they were out for wealth.

They talked of lands and forest pines,
Coal beds and ores of highest grade,
Of gold-seamed quartz and copper mines,
Of railroads, wharves and foreign trade.

Others we met who liked to dwell
On people's thoughts as more than gold,
On schools and learning, and the spell
Of simple worth, unbought, unsold.

Companions thus of every sort
In various fields of work and play
To most of us their hobbies brought
And brightened many a sombre day.

V

We lived, we loved. We drank the joys
Of friendship true and strong and sweet,
Into our homes came girls and boys
To make our happiness complete.

We lived and learned. We reached out hands
Fresh wonders to explore and seize;
We journeyed far to other lands
And sailed in ships on many seas.

Invention's triumphs, growth of art,
And science moving with swift speed,
Were making peoples far apart
To be like neighbors, near indeed.

We thought the world was better grown,
That light and love had wider sway,
That mutual interest held the throne,
And savagery was kept at bay.

There was enough of cruel wrong,
Of stealthy, grasping, hideous greed,
Malignant cunning in the strong
To rob the child in bitter need.

But there were voices in the air
That made to hearts their strong appeal
And there were movements everywhere
To give the weak a fairer deal.

And all the while we seemed to find
A larger, richer, nobler good
In throbbing breast and eager mind,
That cried for human brotherhood.

VI

Those college years of war had wrought,
In some at least, a firm belief
That lives are in the eternal thought,
However long, however brief.

With this belief a radiant hope
That ugly things would better grow,
That with large wisdom's broader scope
Each shadier phase might fairer show—

Belief in men, for men a hope,
For those on all the lower planes,
That they might move on rising slope
To ever fresh and nobler gains.

We thus were in expectant mood
For all that rose within our view,
On overlooking heights we stood
And watched the vision coming true.

This was our mood for fifty years,
A world of sounder heart and mind,
With heightened joys and fewer tears,
A freer, gentler, wise mankind.

For fifty years we saw this trend—
Or thought we saw it—till we neared
The last stage at our journey's end,
When all at once a thing appeared

Appalling on this verge of time,
A sudden cataclysmic burst
Of frenzied, unimagined crime—
An empire mad, for war athirst.

VII

Not from life's lower planes have sprung
Upon the world these terrors dire,
Not from the myriads bred among
The wastes where dwells an unknown sire,

Not from ten million sons of slaves,
Not from the countless Asian horde,
Not from the haunts of murderous knaves
Or lairs of bandits unexplored,

Nor from the wretched and despised,
The weak, the poor, the blind, the dumb,
With minds and bodies undersized,
This menace to mankind has come.

But from a people proudly bred,
 Drilled in a learning large and round,
Schooled to the wealth of heart and head,
 Trusted wherever men were found.

A few of these on shining thrones
 Of title, privilege and light,
Crowned with the polished precious stones
 Of knowledge, science, genius bright—

These few inflated big with pride
 Had come to prate of “superman”
And other peoples to deride
 As drudging beasts to work their plan.

Thence came the dark conspiracy
 That counted rights as but a name,
That trampled covenants in glee
 And wrapped a frightened world in flame.

VIII

For meekness, love and brotherhood
 The Prussian spirit does not care,
Recalls the pagan score of good
 And *Thor* who strikes and does not spare,

That “good old German god” of fight,
 An apotheosis of hate,
The Hohenzollern’s *schrecklichkeit*,
 A blazing Moloch of a state,

To speak the temper of a king
Exultant in his royal line,
Boasting that God is in his ring
To prove his majesty divine.

To such a depth may towering pride
Plunge down in sacrilegious hate
And in sheer madness think to hide
The Satan in a garb of state.

A people who have taught the schools
To sweep all realms for one faint gleam
And this to raise with magic tools
Into a broad and healing beam;

Whose masters freed the trammelled mind
To trust its powers, to think and speak,
To break the slavish cords that bind
And make the aspiring spirit weak;

Whose thinkers quelled the rabble zest
For empty noise and senseless rant
And guided to the lofty quest
Of mighty Luther, Leibnitz, Kant;

Whose kings of music and of song,
Bach, Handel, Hayden and their peers,
Led instruments and voices strong
To rhythm with celestial spheres—

This people drowned in greed for gain,
For conquest, wide despotic sway,
And bending body, heart and brain
To forging weapons for *their* day;

Employing spies against their friends,
Intrigue in all the walks of life,
While their diplomacy extends
A hand that hides the assassin's knife;

This people going on a plan
Thought out with purpose year by year,
Launching at last their brutal plan
Upon the things men hold most dear,

The sacredness of plighted faith,
The right of nations to exist,
The sovereignty of law on earth
To dominate the mailed fist—

And then the war, this crowning guilt,
This latest, blackest, withering curse,
With blood of countless victims spilt
And ravage, ravage—always worse!



X

We thought the world had better grown—
And this the goal toward which we ran!
Where now the hopes we long had known
And where the faith we had in man?

For those who walk the lowlier ways,
Mingling their toils with love and mirth,
We still may hope for brightening days,
Confident in their solid worth.

But for those others throned in power,
Where is the safeguard of the soul
To keep them true in each stern hour,
A regnant conscience in control,

To rein down arrogance and pride,
To curb foul lusts and vengeful spites,
To make wise counsellors their guide
And with good will to shield all rights?

Perhaps we may not hope for this—
If not, the thrones of power should fall.
“No more betrayals with a kiss”
Must be mankind’s insistent call.

For now has come a judgment day
And empires face a solemn bar
And time’s stern judge will have his say
As surges on this testing war.

If power unmakes the man in power
And turns his honor into shame
They who uphold the monarch's dower
Must share with him the fearful blame.

That loyalty alone is sure
Which makes the monarch loyal too,
Compels him to be just and pure,
Humane and upright, staunch and true.

XI

Our cycle thus completes its round
Beneath a thickly darkened sky—
And yet we know, beyond earth's bound,
The eternal stars still burn on high;

And deep within us still abides
The eternal love of truth and right,
Distinct from every sense besides,
A clear and constant shining light.

Against all lies the truth must hold;
Against all wrongs majestic law;
Against all hate loves manifold
Whose height and depth none ever saw.

The moral law within each breast
Still answers to the midnight skies;
The voice of Kant still leads the quest
Of open minds and fearless eyes.

Where crawls the fawning sycophant
One here and there beholds a man
Who stands, like Liebknecht, adamant
Though struck by the imperial ban.

And men must stand by moral law
In distant star and in the soul,
Bowing the head in reverent awe
Before the One who knows the whole.

XII

As move the years we fall behind,
The rear guard of a vanished band,
With wide humanity aligned,
Receptive of the high command.

As thrilled our youth at Lincoln's calls
So now it is at Wilson's word.
We cannot be a despot's thralls;
For rights of men we still are stirred.

To free the slaves was then our fight;
'Tis now to keep from being slaves;
'Twas then to give one race its right;
'Tis now to save the world from knaves.

We won before; we shall win now;
Not by brute strength, nor by sheer right,
But by the gifts that true men vow,
By souls inspired to love the light.

We stood upon the threshold then
And saw beyond the crash and noise
A better order hastening in
To make the saddest heart rejoice.

And so today we look ahead,
Thinking how much is now concealed,
And counting not the past as dead,
Expect its fruits to be revealed.

The sun goes down. Tomorrow comes,
A day of splendor passing thought.
We go from here to our new homes
Leaving for others what we sought.

GEORGE SHERWOOD DICKERMAN.

NEW HAVEN, CONN.
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